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The Role of Empathy in Musical Experience and Understanding

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1. Introduction

We describe music in emotional terms, sometimes employing the language of expression. A piece of music, we might say, is sad or joyful, or expresses anger or a sense of calm. But music, of course, is not sentient and so cannot literally possess or express emotions. So, assuming that such descriptions are sometimes true, this use of emotion terms must be non-literal. This is sometimes marked by saying that while music does not literally *express* emotions, it can nevertheless be *expressive of* emotion.

Plausibly, these descriptions are ways of talking about the way that music *sounds*. After all, music is in some sense organized sound. So it seems reasonable to suppose that a piece of music is sad if and only if it sounds sad. Of course, there may be other reasons to describe a piece of music as sad. Perhaps, for example, it was written in sad circumstances. But that isn't the primary use that I am interested in.

There is a question, then, about how music can sound sad. In virtue of what is it that a piece of music can possess an emotional appearance? Two leading answers to this question appeal, respectively, to emotional arousal and to resemblance. According to arousal views, music sounds sad if it arouses or tends to arouse sadness (or some appropriately related emotional response) in the listener. According to resemblance views, music sounds sad if it resembles sadness or an expression of sadness.

As I've sketched them, these views concern musical experience. They offer accounts of why music sounds as it does. But there is also a question of musical understanding. Not only does music sound emotional, it is also plausible that a proper appreciation of music somehow involves emotion. If you miss the emotional character of a piece of music, then you have missed something important about it. Of course, there are many aspects to a full understanding of a piece of music, relating to structure, genre conventions, and so on, that may have nothing to do with emotion. But grasping the emotional character of music is surely one element in musical appreciation.¹

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Emotion, therefore, seems to be implicated in both the experience and understanding of music.

There is much to be said both for and against each of these views; about whether they can account for musical experience and help us to comprehend musical understanding. I will come back to them in the following sections. But the question that will be my primary focus is slightly different. It concerns empathy. The arousal view is sometimes understood in terms of empathy. The idea, roughly put, is that one has an empathetic reaction to music and it is in virtue of this that music sounds emotional. Although I will not argue for it here, I think that this account is mistaken and rather a version of the resemblance view is correct. Nevertheless, I want to suggest that there is a role to be played by empathy (properly understood) in the analysis of musical experience and understanding.

In sections two and three I will say more about arousal and resemblance, setting out some constraints on a plausible account of emotion in music. In section four I will present a view of empathy, one that I have defended elsewhere (Smith, 2017). In the final section I will bring these issues together, outlining a view in which empathy has an important role to play in musical experience and understanding.

2. Arousal

Music very often moves us emotionally. This fact is placed front and centre by arousal views (Matravers, 2001). One way to think of such views is as analogous to the dispositional theory of colour (Levin, 2000). This theory claims (roughly) that an object is red if and only if it is disposed to cause 'appropriate' visual experiences in 'normal' viewers in the 'correct' circumstances. Exactly what constitutes 'appropriate', 'normal' and 'correct' here are points of contention about which we need not worry. In the musical case that is our focus the idea would be that a piece of music sounds sad if and only if it is disposed to cause 'appropriate' emotional experience in 'normal' listeners in the 'correct' circumstances. Again, what counts as 'appropriate', 'normal' and 'correct' will need to be spelled out. The idea, however, is that there is a genuine emotional experience involved in musical experience and understanding: the emotion of the listener which is somehow projected onto the music.

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Thinking of the emotional character of musical experience in this way has some attractive features. Most obviously, it makes sense of how something non-sentient, such as a piece of music, can be accurately described in emotional terms. Furthermore, it brings feeling into the analysis in a plausible way: the emotionally engaged listener is central to a proper understanding of musical experience and, if the view can be extended appropriately, to musical understanding. This centrality of the emotionally engaged listener seems to me to be an important insight of the view. Any account of musical experience and understanding that finds no role for the emotional reactions of the listener is thereby wanting.

The arousal view is sometimes articulated in terms of the notion of empathy. Peter Kivy, an opponent of the view, writes,

The “fusion” or “empathy” theory [...] has it that in perceiving the [...] music, I feel the sadness which I then project psychologically onto the perceptual object and perceive it as if it were an “objective” quality (Kivy, 1989, 169)²

I will be arguing that, not only is there something right about putting the listener’s emotional experience at the centre of musical experience and understanding, there is also something right about the association of this with the notion of empathy. As will become clear, however, my approach to these issues is not at all consistent with the arousal view. Although empathy has an important role to play, it is not involved in an account of what it is for a piece of music to be expressive of emotion.

One reason for looking elsewhere for the role of empathy is that the arousal view has some difficulty in accounting for two other features of musical experience. These features give rise to the problems of missing and negative emotions. The problem of missing emotions concerns the fact that some people report being able to hear emotion in music without themselves feeling the corresponding emotion (see, for example, Davies, 1994: Ch.4). Notwithstanding the above point about the centrality of the listener’s emotional experience, and taking these reports at face value, emotional arousal does not seem to be a strictly necessary condition of hearing emotion in music. Now, perhaps some such cases can be put down to the listeners not being, in the relevant sense, ‘normal’ or in the ‘correct’ circumstances. It seems, however, highly unlikely that all such cases can be set aside in this way. If we allow that a normal

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listener is one to whom the relevant musical style is familiar, and that the correct circumstances include listening with full attention in a concert hall, then the philosopher of music Peter Kivy would surely qualify.³ And yet he testifies to hearing emotion in music without experiencing that emotion himself (Kivy, 1989).

There are a number of responses that the arousalist can make to the problem of missing emotions. One response begins by pointing out that the arousal view can be understood, in fact was above defined, in a more liberal way than the current objection supposes. For, as stated, the view is that sad music is sad on account of an *appropriate* emotion being aroused in the listener. But an appropriate emotion need not be the *corresponding* emotion, that is it need not be sadness itself. It may, for example, be more appropriate to feel pity, rather than sadness, when confronted with the sadness of another (Matravers, 2001: Ch.8). Thus, the fact that Kivy hears sadness in music without himself feeling sad is not a problem. However, this response represents only a temporary victory. Since those reporting a lack of sadness upon hearing sad music are also likely to report a lack of pity, the problem of missing emotions remains.⁴

A different line of response is to point out that, as defined, the arousal view does not require that every listener be made to feel sad by sad music, only that music is *disposed* to cause listeners to feel sad. Again, the fact that Kivy is not saddened does not falsify that claim (Nolt, 1981, 145). This is correct, but the response comes at a cost. It is one thing for a piece of music to be sad, another for it to sound sad to a particular listener on a given occasion. The analogy with dispositional theories of colours suggests that the arousalist may have the resources to explain the former. For a piece of music to be sad, it is only required that it be disposed to cause appropriate emotions (just as for a rose to be red is for it to possess the appropriate dispositions). But it is less clear that it has the resources with which to explain the latter. For why would the fact that a piece of music causes most 'normal' people to feel sad make it sound sad to a particular person? This question is especially acute for listeners, like Kivy, who claim to hear sadness in music without feeling any appropriate emotion. What we want is an explanation of music's sounding sad to particular listeners on specific occasions. And it isn't obvious how that is to be achieved.

The second problem for the arousal theory is that of negative emotions. Simply put, if sad music tends to make listeners feel sad, then since sadness is an unpleasant

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emotion, that counts as a reason not to listen to sad music (Kivy, 1989: Ch.13; Davies, 1994: Ch.6; also see, Matravers, 2001: Ch.8; Kivy, 2001c). Of course, it can be pointed out that there may be other reasons (e.g. beauty) to listen to sad music such that the reasons to listen can outweigh the reasons to avoid. Nevertheless, the implication seems to be that, other things being equal, we have reason to avoid sad in favour of joyful music. But this seems incompatible with the listening preferences for many 'normal' people. Many people seek out sad music precisely because of its sadness. The arousal theorist needs some explanation of this.⁵

The above considerations are certainly not decisive, and my purpose is not to argue against the arousal view. Rather, my goal has been to set out some constraints on a plausible view. These are that the emotional experience of the listener should play a role in musical experience and understanding; that it is nevertheless possible to hear music as expressive of emotion without experiencing that (or other appropriate) emotion; and that some explanation is given of why many perfectly reasonable listeners seek out music that is expressive of sadness or other negatively valenced (and so unpleasant) emotions.

3. Resemblance

A prominent alternative to the arousal view claims that the emotional character of musical experience should be understood in terms of music's resemblance to emotions and their expressions. Emotional experiences are states of persons that have a certain phenomenal character. That is, there is something it is like to experience an emotion. But many emotions also have, often quite distinctive, ways of being manifested in outwardly perceptible behaviour. Joy is expressed in a smile, sadness in a frown, and so on.⁶ I have argued elsewhere that the perceptual experience of others' emotional expressions can give us access to their emotional life (Smith, 2010; Smith, 2015; Smith, 2018). This can be understood in a number of ways but the most relevant for present purposes is the idea that emotions can characterize the ways people *look*. That is, in the right circumstances, when someone is smiling they not only look smiley, they *look happy*. Generalising beyond vision, and treating appearing as the genus of which looking and sounding are species, we can say that in at least some cases, when an

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individual expresses an emotion, they appear emotional.

If this is along the right lines, then it might be possible to offer a resemblance account of the emotional character of music. For, insofar as a piece of music resembles an expression of emotion, we can claim that it can appear (in this case *sound*) emotional. If a piece of music resembles the expression of sadness, and the expression of sadness can allow the expresser to appear sad, then the music can sound sad. So, the resemblance view can be understood as maintaining that a piece of music is sad if and only if it resembles an expression of sadness.

It is useful, at this point, to consider the different ways in which appearance verbs are used. This is a topic that has been most thoroughly investigated in relation to the term 'looks'. The standard way to think about this, deriving from the work of Chisholm (1957: Ch.4) and Jackson (1977: Ch.2), is that we can distinguish between epistemic, comparative, and phenomenal uses of the word 'look'. A similar three-way distinction can be drawn for 'sounds' and, although categorisation of cases will be controversial, consideration of examples does allow us to gain a sense of the distinction.

An example of the epistemic use of 'sounds' would be a case in which one listens to a report of the tanking economy and says, 'It sounds as though the government will fall'. Here, 'sounds' doesn't really have anything to do with auditory appearance, but rather concerns one's epistemic standing. One could equally have said, 'It is likely, based on hearing this news, that the government will fall'.

The comparative use of 'sounds' is in play when one says, 'You sound like Kate Bush'. Here, one is not expressing any degree of belief that the addressee *is* Kate Bush, so the use is not epistemic. Rather, one is noting a resemblance. There are certain ways that the addressee sounds, and those ways are shared with Kate Bush. These shared ways of sounding need not be articulable by the speaker (though perhaps later one might think, 'oh, yes, it's the high notes'). Nevertheless, presumably they must in some way contribute to the overall sound of the person.

In describing comparative sounds I used the phrase 'ways of sounding'. At their most basic, these are phenomenal sounds. A paradigmatic example might be 'That guitar sounds flat'. Here we are characterising the auditory appearance of the thing, so it is not an epistemic use, and on the face of it we are not saying that the guitar sounds like other flat things sound (after all, how do they sound if not just 'flat?'), so it is not

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comparative. It is sometimes supposed that phenomenal looks are closely associated with the content of visual perception (Brogaard, 2014: §3.3), and something similar might be said of sounds. That is, the ways things phenomenally sound are the ways things are represented as being in auditory experience.

When we say that a piece of music sounds sad, which sense of 'sounds' do we have in mind? It seems obvious that it is not epistemic. In saying that music sounds sad I am not saying that it probably is sad. Rather, I am in some way characterising its auditory appearance. But is it a comparative or a phenomenal use? Given that we are concerned with the *resemblance* view, it seems natural to suppose that it is the former. That is, when saying that a piece of music sounds sad, we are saying that there are some ways that it sounds and those ways of sounding are shared by sad things. And, indeed, this is how I will interpret the resemblance view.⁷ Such an understanding allows us to say that a piece of music can literally sound sad.⁸ When we go on to say that it *is* sad this metaphorical use is justified by the former literal one.⁹

The version of the resemblance view that I have described has the resources to explain not only the sadness of a work but also its appearing sad to 'normal' listeners. A person can look sad even if they do not look sad to anyone in particular (perhaps nobody is looking). Similarly, a piece of music can sound sad even if it does not sound sad to anyone in particular (because nobody is listening). Nonetheless, when someone registers that sad appearance, then the music will sound sad to them.

The most obvious question to ask about this view is whether music really does resemble emotion and its expression and, if so, in what ways? It is natural to appeal here to the vocal expression of emotion. While facial expression is most commonly discussed (Russell and Fernández-Dols, 1997), there is also a significant body of work on the ways in which emotion is expressed in the voice (Laukka et al., 2005; Spackman et al., 2009). Tone of voice is naturally thought of as a form of emotional expression via which a person can *sound* sad. To the extent, then, that a piece of music resembles the vocal expression of emotion it too can sound sad.¹⁰

Prominent defenders of the resemblance view have, however, typically doubted that this form of resemblance can account for all of the emotional character of music (Davies, 1994, 229). It is at this point that the view will have further recourse to the notion of metaphor. For not only do we describe music as emotional, we also describe

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it in spatial and dynamic terms. The idea is that in, for example, describing notes as high or low, melodies as rising or falling, rhythms as fast or slow, we are employing metaphor (Scruton, 1997: Chs. 1 & 2; 2009, Ch.4; Davies, 1994: Ch.5). Music does not, and cannot, literally possess these spatial and dynamic properties. It does, however, possess features that make it appropriate to describe it in these ways. With these metaphorical spatial and dynamic terms at our disposal, it is not too difficult to see how another form of resemblance might be possessed and registered. For sad people move slowly, joyful people smoothly, angry people in a jerky fashion, and so on. In this way music can, for example, resemble the expression of sadness by being slow.

In addition, it may be that music can resemble the experiential dimension of emotion itself, rather than just its expression. For the experience of emotion will involve certain vicissitudes, characteristic patterns of feeling, movements between related types of emotional episode (hope followed by disappointment, for example). These patterns, it might be argued, can be mimicked by the structure of a piece of music by way of the metaphorical application of spatial and dynamic properties mentioned above (Cochrane, 2010a: §4; Langer, 1957, Ch.8).

The resemblance view claims, then, that music is sad if it sounds sad and that it sounds sad if the way it sounds resembles the way a sad person appears: not only the way they sound, but the way they look, and the way their own feelings appear to themselves.¹¹ Just as with the arousal view, however, there are a number of difficulties to be resolved. The central concern that I will address is that such accounts are objectionably cold. Resemblance views hold that for a piece of music to sound sad to someone is simply for it to be registered as resembling the expression of sadness.¹² But this doesn't seem to involve feeling at all. The experience of music, according to the resemblance view, would seem to be an entirely unemotional affair. But, as suggested in the previous section, both musical experience and understanding seem to be things that involve emotion in some way or other.

There may, however, seem to be a double standard here. The arousal view is criticized for being too hot (for requiring emotion where none seems necessary) whereas the resemblance view is criticized for being too cold. I will return to this in the final section but, for now, note that in the previous section I said that although it seems possible for music to sound sad to someone even though they feel no emotion, it is

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also plausible that the listener's emotion is involved *in some way* in musical experience and understanding. It is that latter claim that seems to be flouted by the resemblance view.

There are a number of ways in which the defender of the resemblance view can respond to this objection. Kivy (1989; 2001a; 2001b) argues that what he calls 'garden variety' emotions are not typically involved in musical experience and understanding. But, he maintains, this is not to accept the charge of coldness, for there is a special aesthetic emotion with which one responds to the beauty of music. Thus one is rightly moved by music, but not by feeling an emotion corresponding to (or otherwise appropriate to) that of which the music is expressive.

Davies, on the other hand, accepts that corresponding emotions are often, though not always, aroused by music. He describes this as a form of emotional contagion (Davies, 2011). His claim, however, is that these aroused emotions do not play a role in determining the emotional character of music.

These responses seem plausible as far as they go but they arguably fail to answer the objection in an entirely satisfying way. Both primarily concern musical experience, pointing out that nothing in the resemblance view prevents music from arousing emotions of various kinds, be they 'garden variety' or distinctively aesthetic. They do not, however, give a significant role to aroused emotion in musical understanding. That is, they do not do justice to the thought that a proper appreciation of the emotional character of a piece of music is itself an emotional affair. If one is moved by this thought, then one will agree that more needs to be said about how a resemblance view can put aroused emotion to work. This is my task in the following sections. For, although empathy is typically associated with the arousal theory, I think that we can see how it supplements resemblance views so as to answer this concern.¹³

4. The Nature of Empathy

There are many different views as to the nature of empathy, most of which see it as involving some notion of experiential sharing (Coplan and Goldie, 2011; Maibom, 2017; Matravers, 2017). To empathize with another is to have an emotional experience in common; in some sense or other, to share their pain, or their joy.¹⁴ Elsewhere

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(Smith, 2017) I have defended a view that conceives of empathy in epistemological terms. In this section I will simply summarize some of the most important points. According to the view I defend,

A empathizes with B iff

- (1) A is consciously aware that B is ψ
- (2) A is consciously aware of what being ψ feels like
- (3) On the basis of (1) and (2), A is consciously aware of how B feels

This definition is partly stipulative since the concept of empathy is a relatively modern one (Matravers, 2017: Ch.1) and so the prospects of a conceptual analysis that accounts for all aspects of the notion seem dim. Nevertheless, I claim that this view captures a significant part of the concept as it is commonly used and also that it gives empathy a distinctive role to play in our cognitive economy, namely in coming to know how another person feels. There are many ways in which one can come to know *what* another person is feeling (e.g. fear), but I claim that empathy is required if we are to know *how* they feel.

The above definition can only be satisfied if A and B are conscious subjects. Since I take 'consciously aware that' to be factive, it would seem to follow from (1) that there is something that it is like to be A and something that it is like to be B. This, I take it, is the primary notion of empathy: a connection of feeling between two conscious subjects. Given this, it seems that we may encounter difficulties if empathy is to play a role in musical experience and understanding. For music is certainly not a conscious subject. I will come back to this issue.

How can the three conditions be met? Regarding condition (1) I am maximally liberal. A can come to be consciously aware that B is ψ via testimony, inference, simulation, or perception.¹⁵ The second condition is somewhat more tricky. I claim that, to know what being ψ feels like, A must be acquainted with the feeling of ψ . For A must be able to think ' ψ feels like this', where 'this' is an 'inner demonstrative' picking out the felt quality of the psychological condition in question. The most obvious way to satisfy this condition would be by being ψ at the time. And that is the most natural way to suppose that empathy involves experiential sharing: both subjects

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are in the same affective state. But this need not be the case. One can retain the acquaintance with the feel of ψ in episodic memory and thereby satisfy the condition.¹⁶

I won't say much about the third condition. I will simply point out that even though there looks to be an inferential structure here, I don't think that *conscious* inference need be involved. There is no need to 'work it out'. Rather, in ordinary experience the structure brought out in (1) to (3) is unified in an overall *knowing how it is for another*.

Not only does empathy play an epistemological role in allowing knowledge of how others feel, it also plays a social role in allowing what I will refer to as 'transparent fellow-feeling'. There is transparent fellow-feeling between A and B when both are consciously aware of how the other feels and that each feels the same. That is, there is common knowledge between them of how they feel. There is a sense in which they feel that way *together*. Empathy is required here since it is not enough simply that each knows what the other is feeling, but also *how* that feels and this will require that the conditions for empathy be satisfied. Following Adam Smith (1759), I think that transparent fellow-feeling is something that we take to be intrinsically valuable. It is what we are getting at when we say that someone understands your pain (or your joy). As Smith writes, 'nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast' (Smith, 1759: I.i.2.2). It is valuable for us to have emotional experiences that are common between us. My claim, to be articulated in the final section, is that something like transparent fellow-feeling, and so empathy, plays a role in musical experience and understanding.

5. Empathy and Music

If the paradigm of empathy is a relation of feeling between two subjects, how is this notion to get a grip in the case of music? The first thing to say is that condition (1) 'A is consciously aware that B is ψ ' needs to be understood with the metaphorical use of ' ψ ' in mind. That is, although it cannot be true that the music is literally sad, since it is not a conscious subject, we have been allowing that it can be metaphorically true that the music is sad. This, as I've said already, should be understood as saying something about how the music sounds. While (1), taken literally, entails that B is a conscious subject, it does not if we allow a metaphorical reading. So condition (1) can be

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satisfied in cases where 'B' refers to a piece of music rather than a conscious subject.

Regarding condition (2), nothing special needs to be said in relation to the musical as opposed to the paradigmatic interpersonal case. Since the condition makes requirements only on A's (the listener's) state of knowledge, and says nothing of B, the fact that B is a piece of music, rather than another conscious subject, is not relevant.¹⁷

Condition (3), taken literally, cannot be satisfied if 'B' refers to a piece of music since there is no way that it feels. At this point, however, one can have recourse to the idea, defended by a number of philosophers of music, of a musical persona. Some argue that since music is non-sentient, in order to experience it as sad we must experience it as the expressive behaviour of an imagined musical persona (Levinson, 2006; Cochrane, 2010b). I doubt that this is true. I have already suggested that music is sad if and only if it sounds sad and that music can sound sad if it resembles the expression of sadness. There is no more reason to suppose that this requires one to imagine a musical persona than there is to suppose that the fact that a flute trill sounds like a bird-call means that one must entertain an imaginary bird. Rather, one need only register the resemblance.

Even if it is not necessary for a listener to imagine a persona in order for a piece of music to sound sad to them, however, it may be that the imagining of a persona nevertheless has a role to play. The idea would be that in experiencing music as emotional, one *can* imagine the emotional states in question to be those of a persona with whom one can empathize. Although imagined personas do not literally possess psychological states, within the context of the imagination they do. As such, empathising with a persona would be a way of coming to be consciously aware of how they (in the imaginary world) feel, and thereby of transparently fellow-feeling with them. If we are to go beyond the first two conditions of empathy, something like this seems to be required.

What is involved in imagining a musical persona? At a minimum, I think, it involves imagining someone expressing their psychological states by way of musical sounds. If the music sounds sad, one imagines someone whose sadness is thereby being expressed. Walton (2014a) denies that in so doing one is aware of a particular individual ('this person'), but is rather aware of an indefinite subject (a 'someone'). This seems right to me, and it is in keeping with the idea that the imagination is often

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general rather than particular in its content. Just as one can imagine a tree without imagining any particular tree, so one can imagine a musical persona without imagining any particular person. We may put this by saying that the persona is 'formal' or 'empty'.

Sometimes I may imagine myself as the persona in the music. In this case, the sadness I hear in the music is imagined to be my own. Indeed, since the persona is formal, this would seem to be a straightforward operation. In fact, I think that the phenomenology often involves a conflation between inner and outer perspectives. That is, there is no clear-cut distinction between imagining the music as expressive of my own emotion and imagining it as expressive of that of another. This makes sense given what has been said of empathic sharing: the music can be heard as expressive of a shared emotional experience.¹⁸

When one imagines a musical persona, one may satisfy all three conditions on empathy, thereby empathising with the imagined subject. What about transparent fellow-feeling? Does it make sense to suppose that one can transparently fellow-feel with a persona? This requires not only that one be aware of how the other feels, but also that the other be aware of how one feels, and that all of this be transparent. Now, of course, the music cannot literally know how one feels. But there is no reason to suppose that the imagined persona cannot. That is, one can imagine a persona who knows how one feels and knows that one knows how they feel, and so on. If one does this, one is transparently fellow-feeling with the imagined persona.

Transparent-fellow feeling is not the same as sympathy. Transparently fellow-feeling with another's sadness involves feeling something like their sadness, not something like pity for their sadness. As Scruton (2009: Ch.5) recognizes in the musical case, one is both moved by and moves *with* the music. But that movement is not that of a sympathetic other but rather that of someone who understands and is understood. Transparent-fellow feeling is reciprocal in a way that sympathy is not. This picture tells us something about the importance that many of us accord to the experience of listening to music together. If two listeners both transparently fellow-feel with the music, then they may transparently fellow-feel with each other. In this way, music becomes a medium of emotional sharing and communication.

With this sketch of the role of empathy in musical experience, we can return to the

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conditions on a plausible view set out in section two. There I said the emotional experience of the listener should play a role in musical experience and understanding; that it is nevertheless possible to hear music as expressive of emotion without experiencing that (or some other appropriate) emotion; and that some explanation should be given of why many listeners seek out music that is expressive of negative emotions.

So, what of the problem of missing emotions? There is no concern here at all, since the view accounts for the emotional sound of music in terms of resemblance. And that does not require that the listener experience any particular emotion at the time of listening.

If the arousal view is sometimes charged with being too hot, resemblance views can conversely be accused of coldness. The most damaging version of this objection claims that, according to resemblance accounts, aroused emotions play no role in musical understanding. Yet according to our criteria, they should. But on the account sketched above, the listener's emotion *does* have a role to play. First, the emotionally engaged listener has a deeper understanding of the emotion of which the music is expressive. More than just understanding that the music is sad, we understand what it *feels* like to be that way. Second, our own emotional responses allow us to partake in a reciprocal engagement with the music. In understanding the music we feel ourselves to be understood.

In section four I said that the satisfaction of the conditions on empathy do not require one to actually feel the corresponding emotion at the time at which one empathizes. Rather, one might retain in episodic memory an awareness of the way the emotion feels. It seems, then, that in the musical case empathy and transparent fellow-feeling can be achieved without the listener being emotionally aroused. As such, it might be argued, the view remains objectionably cold. The listener need not be emotionally aroused in order to achieve the relevant musical understanding.

This point must be accepted but it is not, I think, especially damaging. For key to the satisfaction of condition (2) is the idea that one is acquainted with the feel of the emotional experience in question. Even those cases in which this is secured via episodic memory will count as emotional engagement, for a memory sufficient to allow that one is acquainted with the way a past experience feels is a vivid one.

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Vividly recalling an emotional experience while listening to music expressive of a corresponding emotion is surely an emotionally engaged form of listening.

Finally, what of the problem of negative emotions? Can we explain why people would seek out sad music precisely because of its sadness? Yes we can. Since musical experience can involve transparent fellow-feeling, something that we treat as intrinsically valuable, we can understand the appeal of music expressive of negative emotions. In listening to music and both empathising and transparently fellow-feeling with an imagined persona, we feel ourselves to be understood.¹⁹ Of course, this is also possible with music expressive of positively valenced emotions. However, the benefit of being understood in terms of our negative emotions is only available by way of sad, rather than joyful, music. As such, we can understand why people would be motivated to seek out sad music. As Richard Ashcroft's lyric has it in The Verve's 'Unfinished Sympathy', 'I need to hear some sounds that recognize the pain in me'.

6. Conclusion

Empathy plays an important role in musical experience and understanding. We can see how this is so, I have argued, even if we endorse a resemblance view of the emotional character of music. Such a view is sometimes seen as objectionably cold, leaving no room for the emotionally engaged listener. But this need not be the case. The epistemological and social roles of empathy, as I have described them, can be appealed to here. When we listen to music we sometimes imagine a persona whose emotion is expressed by the music. And that person is someone with whom we may empathize and transparently fellow-feel.²⁰

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¹ For an enlightening discussion of this issue, see (Davies, 1994: Ch.7).

² For example, Cochrane (2010a) describes the arousalist aspect of his view in these terms.

³ It is of course important that ‘normal’ and ‘correct’ are interpreted in a principled way rather than gerrymandered in order to get the desired result.

⁴ Also, see (Kivy, 2001c, 145-146) for the claim that there is no such thing as ‘the’ appropriate emotional reaction to an expression of sadness.

⁵ There are, of course, a number of views that one may take on this issue, only some of which are consistent with the arousalist position. For a useful discussion, see (Levinson, 2011).

⁶ For my own account of the nature of expression see (Smith, 2023). For alternative accounts, see (Green, 2007; Glazer, 2017). For recent philosophical and psychological work on emotional expression, see (Abell and Smith, 2016).

⁷ Limitations of space mean that a defence of this claim must wait for another occasion.

⁸ An alternative view is defended by Peacocke (2009a; 2009b) who extends the notion of metaphorical representation from the domains of language and thought to that of perceptual experience. The idea is that experience metaphorically represents music as sad. I do not have the space to evaluate this position. See Snowdon (2009) for a critical discussion with which I am in broad sympathy.

⁹ Davies (1994) refers to what he calls ‘emotion characteristics in appearance’. Although what I have to say in this section is in the spirit of his account, I do not, unlike Davies, suppose that there need be a special use of emotion terms that refers to something other than emotions (i.e. appearances). Rather, the emotion terms retain their usual sense in characterising appearances. When we say that something looks red, the term ‘red’ refers to redness. Similarly, when we say that something sounds sad, the term ‘sadness’ refers to sadness.

¹⁰ Peacocke sounds a note of scepticism here claiming that even the simple case of a minor chord cannot be accounted for via the notion of resemblance since “The minor chord is nothing like a premusical human expression of sadness.” (Peacocke, 2009b, 262). There is some evidence, however, that Peacocke is wrong about this. See, for example, (Cook, 2002: Ch.4) on the chordal structure of ordinary and emotionally charged speech, and see (Liu et al., 2018) on timbre. For a comprehensive review see (Juslin and Laukka, 2003).

¹¹ It sometimes seems to be an unstated assumption that for the resemblance view to succeed the feature in virtue of which music resembles emotion must be one that is essential to emotion (see for example the discussion of Hanslick in, Davies, 1994, 201-221). But if this is sometimes assumed, it should not be. Two things can well enough resemble each other in virtue of their contingent properties.

¹² A subject need not be able to articulate those respects in virtue of which two things are

registered as resembling. This general point carries over to the musical case. A piece of music can sound sad to me, in virtue of resembling various features of sadness and its expression, without me being able to pinpoint exactly what those features are.

¹³ Davies does think of emotional contagion as a rudimentary form of empathy (Davies, 2011). However, he does not give it a significant role in musical understanding. My account, to be elaborated in what follows, does.

¹⁴ There is also a conception of empathy as the direct perception of other's mental states (Zahavi, 2012). While this is an interesting notion which embodies a number of important insights, I think it is quite far from the usual sense of the term and will not discuss it further here. Still others focus on a purely cognitive form of empathy, that need have nothing to do with affective states (for an overview, see Spaulding, 2017). Such 'cognitive empathy' is not my topic here.

¹⁵ Note the implication that, on this view, it would be wrong to identify empathy with simulation, as some do (Jacob, 2015). Simulation, rather, is one of the ways in which one condition on empathy can be satisfied. Similarly, unlike Davies (2011), I would not count emotional contagion as a form of empathy.

¹⁶ Another way in which one might satisfy the condition would be by being acquainted with a feel that is specified at a lower level of determinacy than the target's state. For example, on the assumption that the feeling of terror is a determinate of the feeling of fear, though one may not have experienced the more extreme state, one's experience of fear does acquaint one with the feel of the target's terror, albeit at a lower level of determinacy. For details, see (Smith, 2017).

¹⁷ As Katerina Bantinaki has reminded me, however, the experience of music can guide our thinking about music. Attending to the emotional character of a piece of music, its ebb and flow, can alert us to aspects of emotional phenomenology that we had not previously noted.

¹⁸ There is some indication of this in Walton (2014b) who follows Elliot (1966), though I don't think that either sufficiently emphasize the extent to which music is often heard as something that fails to obey a strict inner/outer distinction.

¹⁹ This is related to what Levinson (2011, 329) calls 'emotional communion'. Unlike Levinson's notion, however, it is independent of the 'expressionist assumption' that the work is expressive of the composer's emotional state.

²⁰ Thanks to audiences in Cardiff and Manchester, and thanks to Ann Whittle and the editors of this volume, all of whom have provided insightful comments on earlier versions of this paper.